

The Long Search by **darthstormer**

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Summary: A series of loosely related one-shots set in an AU I am developing for a longer, traditional work. In this world, Eleven accidentally closed the gate and remained trapped in the Upside-Down after S1 and Mike dedicates his life to finding a way to bring her home.

1. Who is L?

The following clipping was taken from the Indianapolis Star newspaper, dated October 15, 2005

Who is L? Indiana's Lost-Love Mystery

For just over two decades, the greater Indianapolis area has been gripped by a mystery of love and loss, broadcast nightly across citizens-band radio. With little variation, the calls would go out nightly at 7:00, broadcast on CB channel 11. Without fail, the broadcaster would begin the same, "Hey L, it's Me. It's day 6,487." Night after night, the count grew, never repeating, never leaving a gap; the count always stayed properly tied to the calendar. No two broadcasts were ever quite the same, though they progressed in similar fashion. The mysterious Me would send out his greeting and announce the day. He would talk about his day, the weather, life in general. Always, the dictation would turn to how much he misses the enigmatic L and a plea for any sign they are somewhere safe.

The mystery began in early 1984, in the rural counties along the corridor to Chicago. Truckers began swapping stories of a mysterious boy clogging up channel 11 every night, sending out pleas into the void for the return of someone he lost. What was originally thought to be some kind of hoax turned into something much larger than Me could have ever intended. People in the areas with the strongest signal started to tune in nightly, like an old radio drama, to see what he had to say and allow their hearts to break along with his. Always the broadcast came, sometimes a little early, sometimes late, but almost every night it came.

A group of followers began documenting the calls, hoping to untangle the mystery of who Me and L were, and just what had happened to tear them apart such a heartbreaking fashion. The group, dubbing themselves the "Listeners of Eleven" began by working out the date of the first broadcast, nailing down Day 1 to November 14, 1983. Countless hours combing old newspapers on and around that date turned up nothing of note for the group. The most notable thing they could find was a fire at the middle school in Hawkins, but beyond shutting down the school for several days, there were no injuries or

fatalities associated with the event. Nothing that would indicate an L torn painfully away from the boy who loved her.

As the years drew on, the mystery only grew as the broadcasts continued with their nightly fervor. Once in a while, devoted listeners would be treated to additional broadcasts as he reached out in desperation outside his normal evening habit. Often these calls would go out in the morning, often quite early, and would refer to a nightmare; "The same one as always," he would say.

As the 1980s drew to a close, the mystery expanded to a wider audience as Me upgraded to a more powerful radio and began to reach more distant ears. Shortly after that, the broadcaster appeared to relocate to Indianapolis as the center of the broadcast shifted. As the city audience got its first taste of the nightly drama, it was assumed to be a new-age performance art piece put on by one of the local colleges. However, those thoughts were quickly put to rest as "Listeners of Eleven" brought the new audience into their fold and shared what history they had gathered so far.

Speculation has run wild in regards to the identities of both Me and L, and just what the latter's moniker could be short for. When the broadcasts began, Me was believed to be a boy in his mid-teens, which would put him in his thirties now. L is much harder to nail down. Though it is entirely conjecture, L is believed to be a girl of similar age. L is often thought to be short for Leslie, Linda, Lacey and countless others. Another camp within the Listeners group believe L might actually be El, and as such, short for Ellen, Elaine or Elsa.

As for how the two came to be separated, the theories run fast and wild. Many believe the girl died and the whole broadcast to be his sad denial. Others argue that his messages contain references to finding a way to reach her and bring her home. They believe she disappeared under unusual circumstances, possibly abducted, and the boy who loved her is on a never-ending quest to bring her home. Where the truth lies, only the mysterious broadcaster knows for sure.

Through the years, the calls continued on an almost perfect consistency. On occasion, the broadcast would disappear for two or three days, though listeners close to downtown would report to still be receiving a distant and highly garbled transmission. Following

these hiatus, Me would return to the airwaves once more with a renewed sadness and desperation in his plea for a return or the simplest of signs. Several times, longer disappearances of one or two weeks would occur locally but in almost all cases, reports would come in from the Los Angeles and New York City areas, confirming that he was continuing his nightly calls while out of town.

The mystery deepened still further this last August when the calls came to an abrupt end. Early on the morning of August 20, Me sent the following broadcast, recorded and transcribed by a local member of the Listeners of Eleven:

Hey L, its Me. Today is day 7,951. I had the nightmare again, but I noticed something new. It's been staring me in the face since that night but I never put it together. I have to work it out, but I think it might be the answer. If I'm right pause If I'm right, there just might be a chance to reach you.

The broadcast ended there, neglecting the usual plea for a sign. That evening, the usual 7:00 broadcast was not sent; nor has any broadcast been sent since. It has now been almost two months since the world has heard from Me, and all the regular listeners can do is tune-in, wait and speculate. The cynics believe he met an untimely end, either by accident or by his own hand. The majority theory, fueled by hopeless romantics, like to believe that he succeeded in his quest and has been reunited with his long-lost love.

Myself, I like to count myself among the romantics and believe they have been reunited are catching on on lost years. So, to the mysterious Me and his love L, I wish you all the best and extend an offer. When you have caught up your missing decades, the world would love to know your story. Until then, we will wait patiently by our radios, and take a listen on channel 11.

2. Arlington

He walked with purpose, head bent low against the frigid breeze blowing against his back. A light dusting of late February snow obscured the ground, but he knew exactly where he was headed. Though he had only been a few times over the years, the directions were burned into his mind in that special place reserved for all that things that keep him up at night. Turning off the main path, he made his way down a row of neat, uniform headstones, counting off the markers as he passed. Fifteen spaces in from the road, he stopped and bent low, inspecting the marker.

Wiping a hand across the face of the gravestone, clearing the snow away, he revealed the name embossed on raised bronze letters.

Dr. Martin Brenner

Lowering the hood of his thick winter coat, Mike Wheeler stared down in disgust at the name.

"Hello Dr. Brenner.", he spat. "It's been a while. I just wanted you to know that I still remember. The rest of the world has forgotten you and everything you tried to accomplish in life, but not me."

He looked around at the hallowed grounds surrounding him, the weight of the place hardening his resolve.

"You don't deserve a resting place like this. Arlington is supposed to be a place for heroes who gave their lives in service and defense of this country. Not evil bastards like you, who stole children and tried to tear the world apart. You must have had some powerful friends in high places to be laid to rest as a civilian hero, but they've moved on and abandoned you."

He took a deep breath, leaning closer, feeling somehow the Dr. could hear him that much better. "I know there's nothing I can do to you now, but I have enough evidence gathered to destroy what's left of you. Your golden name will become a bloody smudge on this country's history. I could release it and finish you off right now, but I have something to finish first. For now, I must content myself with

the thought that, if there is any justice in the world, you're burning in an eternal consuming fire."

He chuckled to himself as he reached into the pocket of his coat, retrieving a single Eggo waffle and laid it on his gravestone. "Here, heat this up for me."

"She loved Eggos, you know. Such a simple thing, but she loved them from the very start. I think it was the first thing she ate that wasn't something you gave her first. It was an act of defiance, consuming the outside world you tried so hard to hide from her. She left the lab, ready to face an unknown future, because she saw you for what you really were. She was prepared to die for someone she barely knew before she would face returning to your little house of horrors."

He shuddered, a mix of the cold wind and painful memories coursing through him. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in almost fifteen years, since that horrible night she disappeared. The nightmare of her final moments, tearing apart the demogorgon and dragging it out of this world. A part of him died that night, drug out of the world with her. He only hoped, wherever she was, that part of him was with her to give her comfort and warmth in the dark.

A sadistic grin spread across Mike's face. "My fondest memory was watching that *thing* climb out of the wall and spring on you. For the briefest moment, as we turned to run, I saw pure terror on your face. Above the gunfire and running feet, I heard your anguished screams as thousands of razor teeth tore into your flesh."

Calming once more, he went on. "I know she's still out there, somewhere. I don't know when I will find her, but I will find her. I promised to bring her home and I will not rest until I keep that pledge. I promised her a dance and I mean to make good. When I bring her home, I will show her where her Papa is laid to rest. Together, we will stand right here and we will dance on your grave. We will dance until security drags us away. And then, we are going to live."

Rising to his feet, Mike gave the stone a final, hard look. "Shine up those dancing shoes Dr. Brenner, I'll be back with your little girl. Enjoy the Eggo; they're pretty good."

At that, he raised his hood once more and started back across the lawn, headed for his rental car. His flight was in a few hours, and back home, he knew he had several new leads to follow up on. Behind him, three ravens flew down from a tree and began to tear apart the waffle, squawking at each other as they fought over the scraps. To Mike's ears, it sounded like Brenner's dying cries. And he smiled.

3. Rebuilding

"Just two more miles," he thought to himself as he turned a corner and continued out into the quiet suburb on the outskirts of Indianapolis.

Mike Wheeler drove through town, running on emotional fumes and barely holding it together. He hadn't slept more than a few minutes at a stretch in the last three days and his nerves were shot. He had been following up on his strongest lead to date and despite everything, he had allowed himself to get too hopeful once again. Like all the other times, he had met with a dead-end and left himself drained and hollow, unsure how to go on.

Eventually, he reached an unassuming two-story home on a quiet cul-de-sac; his emotional salvation. With every failure, he somehow found his way here on instinct and arrived broken and empty and in desperate need of a friend to put him back together. Stumbling his way to the front door, he rang the bell and then gave the door several loud knocks for good measure. While he waited, he reached down with numb, trembling fingers and undid the laces on his muddy boots, kicking them blindly off to the side. He was about to knock again, when the door swung open and she was there.

"Hey Jen," he choked out.

"Jesus, Mike. You look like hell," she said, eyes full of concern, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. "I wasn't sure you were even coming by. Come on in," she said, standing to one side and allowing him into the entryway. He waited as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Turning face him once more, she noticed the strap still running across his chest. "Uh, Mike, you've still got on the, uh..." as she pointed toward the machete sheathed across his back.

"Oh, right. Sorry. Not sure how I even drove here with that thing on." he replied, undoing the strap and pulling the scabbard from his back, passing it over to her.

Reaching out a hand, she took it from him with an exasperated sigh. "Come on, he's in the study." Jennifer Hayes-Byers led the way down

the hall of the home she and Will had purchased several years before when Will's psychiatry practice had taken off. He followed blindly, running on autopilot as she ushered him into the study and guided him toward one of the overstuffed leather chairs. She knew the chair would need a thorough scrub to get rid of the sweat and grime clinging to Mike after his trying weekend, but she recognized the importance of what he was undertaking and that made the inconvenience more than worth it.

"I'll leave you boys to it," she said, eyeing Will, settled in the matching chair, as she backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Mike looked up and met the concerned eyes of his best friend before dropping his gaze to the table between them and contemplating the bottle of MacNaughton's waiting there.

"Oh, go on," Will offered, "we both know that's the reason you're here."

Throwing his friend a grateful glance, Mike reached for the bottle and twisted off the lid. As he poured a generous glass of the soothing amber spirit, Will added, "Might as well pour me one too." Mike gave a half-hearted laugh at his friend. Will detested whisky and only ever drank it with Mike after yet another devastating disappointment. He was more of a merlot man, he liked to say.

Mike drained a large swallow and settled back in his chair, savoring the burn that slowly sank down his throat.

"So, you want to tell me about it?" Will asked, gingerly taking a sip from his own glass.

"What's there to tell? I hit another dead end. End of story," he tossed out, staring intently at the contents of his glass and deciding to send another swig down to join its companion.

"Oh cut the shit, Mike," Will spat out, startling his friend. "You're my best friend; I know this wasn't just a normal lead you were following. You look like death and you're almost a full day overdue. Much longer and I was going to have to come in after you, and you know

how little I want to do that. On top of that, you still have blood-spatter on your shirt and I'm guessing it's all over that blade you left with Jen."

Mike looked shamefully up at Will as his friend asked again, softness returning to his voice, "So tell me about it. What happened?"

"I really thought I was on the right track this time. Everything seemed to match what I have been looking for. Roads, houses, cars. The vines, just like you said. As I made my way into town, I saw smoke curling up from a small fire, and let myself get hopeful; turned out to be the dying embers of a lightning strike. I scouted for more than a day but there wasn't a single sign a human had ever set foot anywhere around there. I don't know, something just snapped inside me on the trip back."

He paused, looking at Will once more and then casting his eyes down in shame. "After I got back, I just felt so angry and hollow. I went back to the other place." he admitted, long suppressed tears finally beginning to fall. "I'm sorry. I know I said I wouldn't go back there but I just couldn't help it." he sobbed. "I found a group of them, the little ones, grazing on a field of wildflowers, and I just started slashing. I know they're not really demogorgons, but they look so much like them, I just didn't care. I probably killed twenty of them before I just collapsed beside their mangled corpses. The stupid things don't even know enough to be afraid of me, the others just kept on eating, wandering around the bodies of the fallen. I'm not even sure how long I laid there before I finally got back up and made my way here."

Will watched his friend down the final swig from his glass and pour himself another. "Look Mike, I'm not going to tell you what you did was healthy, or even ethical, but we're also dealing with uncharted territory. I can tell you, I understand."

Mike looked up hopefully as Will continued. "As your doctor, and as your friend, though, I have to be frank with you. You have to stop doing this to yourself."

Anger flashed across Mike's face as he moved to respond, but Will silenced him with a gently raised hand. "That's not what I meant. I'm

not asking you to stop your quest to bring her home; far from it. She saved my life that day and I want you to find her just as much as you do. No, what I'm saying is, you're undertaking a search against astronomical odds. I firmly believe you will find her, I wouldn't let you continue if I didn't think there was a chance. But with the odds stacked so much against you, you can't fall apart like this every time a lead doesn't pan out. Is that what she would want?" he asked, nodding his head toward his desk.

Sitting on the top shelf, next to a photo of Will and Jennifer on their wedding day, was the sketch of El. Mike thought back to that fall, after Will was home from the hospital, when he had asked his friend to sketch her portrait. Will had poured over the drawing for days, starting with his own fevered recollection, from when she found him in the In-Between. Then he refined it with input from Mike, Dustin and Lucas until they all agreed he had captured her face exactly. He had given Mike the original but insisted on keeping a copy for himself as well.

Mike stared hard at the framed portrait, the face he had committed so firmly into his mind he saw her every time he shut his eyes.

"I know I never met her, not really," Will continued. "But you've told me every shred of information you knew about her and what she was like. I can safely say she wouldn't want you tearing yourself apart like this. If she's out there, in the place you think she is, your memory is likely the only comfort she has to keep her going. When you bring her home, she deserves the boy she remembers, not some vacant husk like this. And you're making progress Mike, you really are. Yeah, you slipped up today and went on your therapeutic murder-spree, but it's been a long time since you've done that. And you've confined your drinking to our visits over here, you're not losing days at a time drunk at home anymore."

"I just..." Mike began, before stopping to collect his thoughts once more. The exhaustion and whisky were rapidly dragging him under. "I just keep thinking, what if there was something more I could have done that night; some way I could have stopped her from having to kill it herself? And I keep worrying, what if I'm already too late? I mean, a week in that place almost killed you, and I've left her rotting there for almost twenty years."

Mike looked back at his friend, ashamed as he saw the panic of recollection cross Will's face as he downed the last of his drink.

"I'm sorry. I know I've made you relive that week way more times than you deserve. But you know what I mean."

Calm as ever, Will asked, "Do you honestly believe she blames you at all for what happened that night? Do you think she would want you blaming yourself?"

Mike shook his head, knowing his friend was right. It wasn't the first time they had this conversation and likely wouldn't be the last.

"As for my time in the Upside-Down, sure, that week almost killed me. But I was on the run the whole time, never sleeping, nothing to eat, no water. Then the demogorgon got me and jammed that tentacle egg thing down my throat. So, yeah, a week almost killed me. Eleven? If she killed that thing on the way through, then she would have had time to actually get her bearings, find food and water and shelter."

"And don't forget all those super-powers you spent years telling me about," he added with a grin.

At that, Mike smiled. It was just what he needed to hear, and Will knew it. They lapsed into silence as Mike slowly drained the rest of his glass. Minutes later, sleep finally won out as Mike laid his head back and closed his eyes. Will grabbed an old wool blanket from the closet and laid it over his friend, carefully slipping the glass out of Mike's hand. Walking out of the office, he closed the door gently behind him and walked down the hall to the living room, where he found Jennifer curled on the couch with a book. As he sat down next to her, she closed the book and shifted to cuddle up to Will.

"So, how bad is it? He going to be alright?" she asked, concerned for their friend.

"Oh, he'll wake up sometime tomorrow with a killer headache. But like always, he'll pop a couple Advil, drink a pot of coffee, and get right back to work tracking down his next lead."

"Do you really think he'll find her?"

"I think so," he said, then added, "I hope so. I have a lot to thank her for."

4. The Call

Transcript of Transmission

Date: November 7, 1984

Time: 7:09 PM

Duration: 4 minutes 19 seconds

Medium: Citizens-Band radio, channel 11

Subject(s): Mike Wheeler, (Broadcast Unanswered)

Hey El, it's Me. It's day 360.

I really miss you.

Today is November 7th. It's been one year since we first met. One year ago, tonight, we found each other in the rain. One year ago, I brought you home, and I promised to keep you safe. Do you remember the blanket fort? I still have it up. It's waiting for when you come home.

I made you a promise, that I would keep you safe. That I would protect you. That I wouldn't let them get you. I'm so sorry, El. I tried and I couldn't stop them. I'm sorry.

sobbing....transmission remains active.

I'm so sorry.

I skipped school today and went out to the woods, where we first met. I'm sure there will be hell to pay once my parents find out I skipped again, but I don't really care. I'm sure I'm just going crazy, but being back there, in the woods, it was almost like I could feel you there with me again.

long pause

The guys tell me I have to stop doing this to myself; calling you every night. Looking for you in the woods. They won't say it, but I'm pretty sure they think you died that night. I've told them I can still feel you with me

sometimes, but I don't think they believe me. Well, mostly. I think Will believes. He wants to be able to thank you someday.

I know you never got to meet Will, not really, but I think you'd really like him. He's gentle and quiet too, like you.

long pause

I know you're still out there, somewhere. It can feel it deep down inside. Wherever you are, I just hope you can hear me. I hope your safe. Know that I won't give up on you. I'll keep calling to give you a beacon. I can be your lighthouse to guide you safely home.

I...I don't even know if you know what a lighthouse is. It's a really bright light that guides ships on the ocean away from danger and guides them safely back into port. As long as it takes, I'll be your lighthouse, El.

sobbing

If you're out there, please, give me a sign you can hear me. Anything at all.

sobbing

Please El, just a little sign. I want you to come home. I need you. I don't know if I can go on without you.

pause

I love you, El.

soft crying heard for the remaining minute of transmission

Analyst Steven Jackson pulled the transcript from his typewriter and looked over it carefully, comparing the typed copy to his handwritten notes. He had been assigned to record and transcribe the nightly radio calls - Wheeler Watch, as it had come to be known - for almost five months. Before him, several other analysts had been assigned to the post but no-one had been able to stomach the the job for very long. Transcribing enemy communications during wartime was one thing. Recording the nightly pleas of a heartbroken thirteen

year old boy was something else entirely.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Steven sealed the report into an envelope and addressed it for inter-office routing.

Dr. Samuel Owens

Head of Special Projects

Hawkins National Laboratory

Leaving the building and heading to his car, Steven knew he needed a stiff drink. Most days he was able to shake off the things he had heard, but once in a while, Mike's pleas were particularly heartbreaking to listen to. Steven had only heard Mike profess his love for the girl on one other occasion, but it was always there in his voice. Mike desperately held out hope for the girl, though the general consensus held that she had died that fateful night.

He had come to Hawkins shortly after the event, as Brenner's people were quietly shuffled to other locations; those who even survived everything that had occurred. He had never known the girl, Eleven, but from the descriptions of those who remained who had known her, he could understand Mike's sorrow at her departure. That is what gave him the strength to listen, night after night, feeling that Mike's pain shouldn't just float off into the universe unheard.

Parking outside the tavern on the edge of town, Steven walked in and noted the handful of regulars occupying the bar. His eyes fell immediately to the man in a darkened booth in the corner and gave him a nod. Jim Hopper sat staring hard at the glass of whisky in front of him, clearly feeling the effects of the previous glasses and about ready to pass out at his usual table for the night. Steven felt sympathy for the police chief, doing his best to drown his mistakes. It was little secret around town that the department was in the process of seeking a new chief and preparing the oust Hopper from his role; most days he was too hungover to do more than sit at his desk.

Of course, no one in town knew just what demons were eating away at him night after night. In the lab, the exact details of that fateful night were classified, but most were aware of deal the chief and Mrs.

Byers made to get her son back. The chief had given up the location where the girl was hiding; a confession that had led directly to her loss that night. He had blamed himself every day since and searched desperately for any sign she was alive.

When Hopper had first found out Steven was working for the lab, he had proceeded to beat the hell out of him behind the bar. A few weeks later, he started drilling him for information, desperate for any news that would indicate subject Eleven was okay. He had shared what information he could, on the nights the chief was still conscious enough to hear it. It had been several months now since the chief had done more than regard Steven with a glance across the bar. As the anniversary of her disappearance approached, Hopper had pretty much given up hope and was doing his best to drink himself to death in some dark penance for his self-perceived sins.

Settling at the bar, the bartender brought him over his usual order: a beer and a shot of whisky. Raising the small glass and contemplating the brown spirits within, he offered up a silent toast. "Eleven, wherever you are, know you are not forgotten. I hope you make it home safe. Mike, don't give up. I hope you find one another."

5. Her Lion

It had been two years since El disappeared in a cloud of ash, dragging the demogorgon out of this world. It had been a year since Nancy and Jonathan managed to get the lab shut down for good, its doors shuttered and chained. El had not found her way back from Upside-Down, and Mike knew he had to find a way to go and get her. The girl he loved was stuck and he wouldn't rest until she was home. If there was any place that could help him figure out how to get to her, it was the lab where she was raised.

When it had finally happened, the lab was shut down in a hurry. Anything expensive, irreplaceable, or of use somewhere else was loaded onto trucks over the course of just a few days. Everything else - desks, chairs, file cabinets and the like - were left behind. As he walked through the woods on the way to the perimeter fence, Mike hoped that the files related to Brenner's experiments were included in the inventory left behind.

He was pleased to find the fence-line was already showing signs of failure, as several large gaps had been dug underneath by the local wildlife. Shoving his backpack through ahead of himself, Mike crawled through the gap, gouging a deep scratch into his arm on the bottom of the chain-link. Brushing off the dust, he made his way to the most obvious entry he could think of: the front doors. After making quick work of the padlock with a pair of bolt-cutters hidden away in his pack, he pulled the chain free of the plywood panels and let himself in. He pulled the doors shut behind him as best he could, hoping it wouldn't raise the suspicions of any security detail that might drive by while he was searching.

After retrieving a flashlight from his bag, Mike slung the pack over his shoulders once more. He winced as the strap rubbed the scrape on his arm, and he realized he would have a hard time explaining the blood on his sleeve when his mom went to wash his shirt. "That's a problem for later," he thought, as he began to explore the dark and dusty corridors of the lab. It didn't take long to find the main stairwell, and he decided he would go to the bottom and work his way back up. As he wound his way down, he had to fight the urge to

turn back. With no electricity or equipment running, the silence was unnerving and every footstep echoed away down deserted halls and returned like unearthly moans. He steeled his nerve, knowing that however much this place scared him, the place she was stuck was infinitely worse.

Soon enough, he found himself in the lowest level, in a large open room. He recognized it immediately from Hopper's descriptions and Eleven's pained explanations. This was where they made her send her mind out into the beyond to find people and monsters. Along the far wall, the plaster and tiles still bore the scars of gate, now closed and silent. In the middle of the room stood a large tank with a sliding metal shutter. The Bath, she had called it. She had explained all about the tank and its purpose on the drive to the school that terrible night. Looking at it, he knew immediately it was a name Brenner had carefully selected to minimize her fear. Mike couldn't even begin to image how terrifying it must have been to be lowered into the deep water, the top sealed up and the shutter slammed shut, cutting out the world. He took a step forward, inspecting the cylinder, now standing empty and dry. A single, large crack ran up the bottom half of the glass like a jagged scar.

Knowing there was still a lot of lab to explore, Mike continued searching the basement for anything that might help him in his quest. Finding nothing, he climbed back up one floor and tried again. This level contained quite a few of the old lab spaces and offices. The experiments were long gone, the spaces now filled with stacks of chairs, desks, office equipment and file cabinets. Sliding open several drawers, he satisfied himself the contents had been removed before relocating the cabinets. Returning to the main floor, he found things much the same, though more of the offices sat empty, their furniture having been consolidated downstairs.

As he turned a corner down yet another hallway, the walls changed from dark-wood panelling to sterile white tile. He came to a pair of security doors, now sitting propped open, their handles chained to bolts mounted on the walls. His heart beat faster. "This could be what I'm looking for," he thought. The rooms along this new hallway looked like they were set up for observation, rather than typical lab work. After passing several empty rooms, he came to one with stack

after stack of file boxes. Playing the beam of the flashlight over the ends of the boxes, he found they were cryptically labeled with project names and date ranges; going through them all would not be an easy task.

Knowing he needed a better idea of just how much there was to search through, he checked the next room. It too was stacked full of boxes, hopefully detailing every aspect of the work the lab had been doing and giving him answers as to how to find her and bring her safely home. The next room lacked any windows so he was unprepared for what awaited him on the other side as he swung the door open. The workers in the lab - those who were even allowed down this wing - had usually referred to it as 'the bedroom.' After the events of 1983, no one had wanted anything to do with the old project, so they had simply closed the door on the room and pretended it didn't exist.

Mike's heart froze as he stepped through the door and surveyed the small space, knowing immediately what he was looking at. He panned his light around the room, taking in the contents. A plain metal desk and chair. A small shelf with a few towels. A small bed. Lying on the floor was an old crayon drawing, the tape that once held it to the wall having long ago lost its hold. It was a simple drawing of a little stick figure child and a taller stick figure man. The figures were carefully labeled "11" and "Papa" in a child's handwriting. Without warning the tears stinging at the corners of his eyes broke free. This had been her room; her prison. This had been the room where Eleven sat in isolated silence, waiting for Brenner to appear and exploit her powers.

Mike slipped the picture in his bag; something of hers to hold tight to. Aside from memories, this drawing was the only thing he had that proved she had been a real girl who existed and lived and breathed. He looked around the room, desperate for more signs of her to cling to, his resolve beginning to dissolve into hopeless despair. Sitting in the middle of her bed was a little stuffed lion. He sat on the bed and picked up the stuffed animal, gently brushing off the dust that had collected in the two years since she had held it. In spite of the time separating them, Mike could almost feel her presence as he looked around the room. His heart broke once more as he imagined the

timid existence she lived. There were no signs of other toys or games in the room, nor crayons or paper. That meant even her simple drawing had been a rare treat, probably a reward for completing one of Brenner's terrible tasks. Almost nothing existed that would betray the knowledge that a little girl had grown up in this tiny space. Just a little desk and a little shelf, a little bed and a little stuffed lion.

Anger and sadness swirled through his mind, fighting for control as he sat there hugging the lion tightly to his chest. Tears fell anew, running down his cheeks unheeded as he contemplated the loss. She had lost her childhood in this cold and lonely place. She was lost in the Upside-Down with no way to get home. He had lost the girl he loved. He had realized shortly after she was gone, that he had fallen in love with her at first sight, that night in the rain. He felt his soul was bound to hers in some way that he couldn't put into words and he felt like a huge part of his was missing with her gone. He had never gotten the chance to tell her how he felt, beyond his rambling attempt in the cafeteria and one brief kiss. It had been clumsy and awkward but it had also brought a smile to her beautiful face and that was the memory that burned bright in his heart whenever the despair tried to force its way in.

As the tears ran silently down his face, he lay down, barely fitting in the tiny bed where she had once slept. He pulled the lion tighter to his chest, closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry El." he whispered into the darkness. "I'm so sorry. I don't know how to find you, but I will find you. I love you Eleven."

Somewhere in the tears and the grief, Mike drifted off to sleep, his head resting where her's once lay. Hours later, that's right where the Military Police officers found him. They had been going around the building on a routine patrol and had easily spotted the cut lock and the chain lying in a heap by the door. They woke him and escorted him to their truck waiting outside. Clinging tight to the lion, refusing to let the connection with her fade away, he managed to convince the MPs he had run away from home, knowing he could find shelter at the lab.

He had walked shamefully to his front door with an officer on either side. He had stood there, head hung low as they explained where

they had found Mike and detailed the numerous federal laws he had violated by breaking into the lab. At one point, his mother had caught his eye and given him a knowing look. She didn't know the full story, but she had pieced together a lot of what had happened between Mike and the mysterious basement girl and knew it had ties to the lab.

"We're not pressing charges this time," one of the officers explained. "Just give us your word you're not going back there."

"I promise. I won't go back there," Mike assured them. At that, they turned and headed back to their truck.

Walking into the house, Mike made a promise to himself as well; the next time he went to the lab, he would have to be much more careful about covering his tracks.

6. Ten Years

Ten years; could it really have been that long? They met each year to commemorate the day she went away, to remember the amazing light she brought into their lives and discuss the hope that one day, somehow, she would come back to them. The group had dwindled over time as those who knew her moved on, but there would always be those who would never stop coming. And so it was, this November 12, the group was down to three: the heartbroken, the guilty and Will.

Hopper showed up to Smith's Tavern early and secured the corner booth, though in truth he would have been there at the same time to claim that spot on any other day. For one night, at least, he wouldn't be drinking alone. The former police chief turned local handyman was a regular fixture in the tavern, and had been for as long as anyone could remember. He had, for the most part, eased up on his drinking and rarely passed out in the booth anymore, but he was still there to knock a few back just about every night. His doctor had warned him he needed to cut the drinks out entirely as he was facing terminal liver failure, but Hopper figured there was little point in prolonging the inevitable.

The next to arrive was Will, having made good time coming down from Chicago where he was working on a Master Degree in clinical psychology with an emphasis in pediatrics. After the childhood he had survived, he wanted to be able to help children overcome their own traumas, as he ultimately had. Sliding into the booth, he greeted Hopper and ordered a beer, as Hopper requested a second whisky. After exchanging pleasantries, they regarded one another with a contemplative silence. Will was never quite sure what to say to the man who had stepped into another universe and ripped him back from the grips of death.

The awkwardness was quickly relieved by the arrival of Mike.

"Sorry I'm late," he began as he slid in next to Will. "There was a major pile-up on I-65 on the way up here."

"That's alright," Will responded. "I only just got here myself."

They spent a few minutes catching up until the bartender came over to drop off Will's beer and Hopper's whiskey. "What can I get you?" he asked, turning to Mike.

"Three shot glasses," he answered, passing over a \$10 bill.

"Mm hmm," the bartender grunted as he took the bill and headed behind the bar to retrieve the glasses. He didn't know what they were toasting, but these kids had been joining Hopper in the middle of November for the last five or six years and always brought a bottle of their own. They kept to themselves and tipped well, so he didn't mind overlooking them brining in their own stuff, nor the fact that aside from Hopper, none of them had even been old enough to be in there until recently.

As he returned with the requested glasses, Mike pulled a chilled bottle of Stolichnaya from his bag and twisted off the lid. It was an old joke, but he always felt it was fitting to toast Eleven, who was raised to fight the communists, who the town thought was a Russian spy, with a proper bottle of Russian Vodka. Pouring out three generous shots, he slid two glasses toward his companions.

Raising his own glass, Mike began "You came into my life amid wind and rain and left my soul forever changed. I don't think I had truly lived a single day before I met you and my life stopped again the day you went away. I promised to keep you safe and to give you a home, for your own life to finally start. I'm so sorry I let you down that day. I am forever grateful for the sacrifice you made, putting my life, and everyone else's above your own. Wherever you are, I hope you are safe. Know you are not forgotten and I will find my way to you. I will bring you home. I promise. Here's to you, El."

Will and Hopper raised their own glasses in reply. "To El!"

They downed the harsh spirit and Mike poured them another round.

Will went next, raising his glass. "You were my one and only hope. When nothing else could be done, you found me. Like a beacon, you guided them to me. I would have died in that terrible place if not for you. I know it's not nearly enough, but all I can say is, Thank You El."

Mike and Hopper raised their glasses once more. "El!"

Finally, it was Hopper's turn. He stared at his glass for a long time before finally raising it. "I'm...I'm sorry. I never meant for any of it to happen. If I could take it all back, I would. Wherever you are right now, please hold on. He'll find you, I know he will. I'm so sorry, El."

They raised their glasses once more in her honor and drank down the clear liquid, letting the burn waft slowly over them as it sank down their throats. In his lap, Mike released the transmit button on his radio he had been holding down through their toasts. It was smaller than his usual setup, but he hoped she was still able to hear it tonight and know she was not forgotten.

They shared several more rounds, sipped more slowly, sharing memories of the girl who had forever changed their lives. Hopper always took great pleasuring hearing about when she flipped the van and held a secret wish she could have thrown it just a little further and crushed Brenner in the process. How different all their lives might have turned out if one little thing had gone different that week. Things came to an abrupt halt when Tim McGraw's "Don't Take the Girl" came on the radio; the lyrics hit just a little too close to home for their taste, and they decided to move things to Hopper's house while they could still reasonably function.

Settling into Hopper's living room, they quickly finished off the rest of the vodka and Hopper broke out a cheap bottle of imported Canadian whisky to round out the night. One final glass left Will snoring softly at the end of the couch. Mike and Hopper were both much more accustomed to drowning away their problems and could have gone on late into the night. Instead, each sat with a fresh glass, lost in contemplation and not ready to shut off the world yet.

Finally breaking the silence, Hopper asked one of the questions that burned away at him nearly every day. "So kid, do you really think you can find her?"

Looking up from his glass with a hard stare at Hopper, he replied "Yes. I can feel her out there, calling to me, trying to show me the way." Taking a deep breath and getting more serious once more, he continued. "I know this whole thing is a long shot, but I've already

eliminated a dozen strong matches. I always figured the How would be a lot harder to work out than the Where, but I know I'll get there. I have to get there. I can't just leave her trapped. I don't care if it takes a lifetime, I will bring her home. I have to keep strong, to keep pushing forward and never giving up. For her."

Hopper drained his glass in a long, slow swallow and thought hard about what Mike had said: keeping strong for her and never giving up. He slipped two fingers under the blue hairband wrapped around his left wrist and gave the elastic a gentle twist; sometimes it surprised him that it had any stretch left after all these years.

"Did I ever tell you about when Sara died?" he asked, out of blue. Mike knew a little about the daughter Hopper had lost, but that had been years before he came to Hawkins and it wasn't one of the subjects that came up in general conversation.

Not expecting a response, Hopper continued on. "The night she lost her hair, I had been helping get her ready for bed and as I took her hairband out, her hair came with it. I had only slipped the band on my wrist to deal with the hair, but after that, I couldn't bring myself to take it off again. Later, she told me she wanted me to keep wearing it, to remember her. I think she had made peace with the fact that she was dying well before her mother and I did. She told me that it would make me stronger. When she wasn't strong enough on her own, it would help me to be strong for her. I wasn't strong enough for her, Mike. In the end, I couldn't save her."

He paused to catch his breath, tears brimming in his eyes at the flood of memories long suppressed, surfacing in his mind. "Even after she was gone, I couldn't bring myself to take it off. She's given me the strength to hold on, to keep moving forward for another day. I think, somehow, I've been hoping in some way, it could help save Eleven and bring her home."

At that, he slipped the band from his wrist and passed it over to Mike. "Be strong for her, Mike. Keep looking and don't give up. Bring her home."

Mike stared for a long time at the band and thought about all it represented, before slipping it on his own wrist and looking at

Hopper once more. "I will. I promise."

Hopper smiled then and closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair and letting the whisky overtake him at last. Mike had no way of knowing just how far Hopper's disease had advanced and that by next November, he and Will would be toasting to Eleven without the chief. Mike could only take comfort in the fact that, for the first time in years, the man appeared to be at peace with himself. The guilt of that single decision ten years ago had slowly eaten away at him, leaving behind a hollow shell of the man he had once been. He had drained countless bottles trying both to convince himself there had been no other choice than to hand her over to Brenner in order to save Will.

Mike looked down at the glass in his own hand, and the blue hairband now wrapped securely around his wrist. He knew he couldn't let the despair overtake him and gnaw away at him from within. He had to be strong, for her. Whatever it took, he owed it to her to keep strong. He drained the last of his glass and checked his watch, sensing it was probably almost time; the display read 10:00 PM. "Close enough," he thought as he pulled the radio from his bag and held down the transmit button.

"Hi El, it's me. Today is day 3652. Exactly ten years ago, you said goodbye and gave your life for mine. I hope you're still able to hear me, because I want you to know I haven't forgotten the promises I made that night. I will find you, and I will bring you home."

Author's Note:

I cheated a bit, in the bar. In this universe, because Eleven didn't come back, and Mike was sad, something-something Butterfly-effect, Tim McGraw released his song a year earlier than in our universe, in 1993 instead of 1994. The song came to mind while I was writing this and it was too perfect not to use it.

7. He's Coming for Me

He said he's coming to get me! Eleven ran it over and over in her head and still couldn't believe she had heard it. It was the first thing that had brought a smile to her face in months, and the movement of those muscles felt almost foreign in her cheeks.

Life in the Upside-Down had become a routine, but it suited her well enough. Today had been a day like any other. She sat watch through the dark hours, spear at the ready, careful not to make a sound when the spiders came in search of dinner. She slept a few hours when the blue light returned to the sky and the creatures of the night went back into their holes to rest. She had made a quick breakfast out of the last of yesterday's vines. She pulled on her cloak, shouldered her bag and grabbed her trusty knife. On her way out, she picked up the water jug for a sip and realized it had run dry again, so she carried that with her as she headed out in search of fresh vines.

It had turned out to be a good gathering day. The rain overnight had finally made the water in the pond more tolerable again, so she made a return trip with several more jugs to stock up while she could. The spiders hadn't finished off all of their kill from last night's hunt, so today would be a meat day. She worked quickly, carving off what scraps of meat she could manage to free from the carcass and added them to her bag. It was a four-leg, but the hairless kind. Their meat wasn't all that pleasant, and far too greasy, but meat was meat and it kept her strong here.

Back in her den, she started a fire and cooked up the meat, roasting chunks on the end of sharpened sticks propped over the flames. While they sizzled away, she cut up sections of vine and skewered them to brown and soften as well. It had taken a while, but it no longer bothered her the way they continued to writhe and squirm as she prepared them for cooking. After a hearty meal of meat and vine chunks and several large swallows of water that didn't taste like decaying plants, she actually felt almost full. It had been weeks since she had eaten so well and it left her feeling drowsy and at peace. Curled up in her nest, she closed her eyes for another quick nap before rousing by instinct as the blue light faded from sky, giving

way to the black once more.

It was finally her favorite time of day. Mike always called out to her just when the last of the light was fading from the sky. Even when things got bad, and the water ran low and meat was scarce, his calls reaching out to her gave her a measure of comfort to keep going. Some days he sounded hopeful, some days lost, most days sad, but still he called to her. Tonight was different somehow. He sounded more determined than she had ever heard him before.

"Hi El, it's me. It's day 365," he began.

She knew the date, of course. She had been counting along with him, scratching marks into the wall in groups of five, the way Papa had taught her to count.

"One year ago, you saved my life. You saved all our lives. And then, you were gone. I know you're still out there, somewhere. I don't know how, it's just a feeling. Everyone thinks I'm crazy for hanging on for this long without a single sign."

He paused for a moment and let go of the button on his radio. She fought hard to keep him in focus until he started to speak again.

"I've been praying every day for a sign that you're alright. I've been hoping beyond hope you'd somehow find your way back to me. But I see now that you can't get back to me."

She braced herself for what he was about to say. She had known it was coming for quite a while and had been doing her best to mentally prepare herself for the day it finally happened. She knew how much it hurt him to hold on to her memory and he couldn't do that to himself forever. As desperate as she was, not to be forgotten, she knew it would be better for him to get it over with. He was about to let her go. She took a deep breath in unison with his own, tears already burning in her eyes.

"Since you can't get back to me, I'm coming to get you. I have no idea how I'm going to find you, or how to get there. I have no idea how long it might take, but I'm coming to get you, El. Please don't give up on me; I promise I won't ever give up on you. I'm coming and I'm

going to bring you home."

Just then, she heard Mike's mom yell something unintelligible down the basement steps.

"Alright, I'm coming, just a minute," he yelled back. Then, much softer, he finished his promise to her. "Please hang on El. You're the strongest person I've ever known, I hope you can be strong for just a little longer. I'm coming"

With that, he put down the radio and he was gone. As her mind pulled back into the reality of her nest, she felt hot tears rolling slowly down her cheeks. Still, her face was pulled into a wide smile. Mike was coming to bring her home. If he wasn't giving up, then neither would she. Life in the upside down wasn't pleasant, but she had settled into a manageable routine and with the knowledge that he was going to come for her, she could hold on as long as it took. Besides, she thought, it still beat life inside the lab.

She wiped away the blood from her nose and the tears from her cheeks with a quick swipe of her sleeve and watched the last hints of light fade from the sky. She had to remind herself that night was coming on fast and her quiet watch was about to begin once again. Quickly removing the last of the vine chunks from their roasting sticks, she stored the food away for tomorrow's breakfast. Grabbing the dousing-blanket from where it was folded neatly away, she shook it out and laid it across the fire pit, extinguishing the flame and snuffing out the embers. The temperature immediately began to drop as she grabbed her long stick with the sharpened point and settled back into her nest, pulling the pile of blankets tight around her body for warmth.

A few minutes later, she heard the familiar rustling as dozens of enormous legs scuttled their way past, outside the safety of her little enclosure. Thankfully, they past quickly and not long after, she heard the distant cries of whatever creature had the misfortune of crossing their path tonight. It sounded large, perhaps a furry four-leg that they wouldn't eat completely; she would have to check tomorrow. It was foolish to hope, she knew, but maybe she would get two meat days in a row.

Since they rarely passed her way twice in one night, Eleven let her mind wander in peace as she sat there in the dark. Mike said he's coming to get me, and friends don't lie.

8. I Will Find You

I Will Find You

I'm not sure if it has been 353 days or not, since I first began this tale. These one-shots were supposed to get the juices flowing on the more complete story I intended to tell: Mike's long search for Eleven. The story has gotten away from me more than once, it has made me face a few of my own inner demons, and on more than one occasion I have been tempted to delete the thing entirely. But through life, work, family, a new house, more gin than is probably good for my liver, and everything else that comes along in nearly a year, I am happy to say I have reached my goal of something I feel is worthy of the story I hoped to tell.

I have posted the first chapter of *I Will Find You* today (this site / s/13153074/1/I-Will-Find-You).

I want to take a moment to thank those of you who left such amazing and kind feedback on these one-shots, and to those who have reached out in the months since to provide the encouragement to keep going. I hope my tale is worthy of your patience.

Thanks:

darthstormer